



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE PURPOSE OF JONAH'S MISSION TO NINEVEH

By REV. ARTHUR W. ACKERMAN,
Portland, Ore.

It would seem that something should be said to turn the minds of biblical students from the initial misconception of the book of Jonah. Every theory of interpretation which has been advanced of late is based on the idea that Jonah went to Nineveh to convert the heathen from idolatry to the worship of the living God. As a matter of fact, there is not one hint in the book that gives ground for this interpretation; it is a bald assumption. Where the suggestion came from the writer is not able to say, but it has the names of eminent scholars back of it, and the whole school of modern critics with it. At least since the teaching of Professor Franz Delitzsch the book has been considered "a foreign missionary book," as the Old Testament parallel to the experience of the apostle Peter, and here, "in the midst of the Old Testament, the barriers to the announcement of salvation are broken down, and with them the barriers of the national exclusiveness." Let an impartial critic take this book out of the Old Testament canon, and he would never think of such a thing as is here suggested, as there is positively no internal evidence to hint at such a conception. And if an earnest thinker will weigh the book in its rightful place in the history of Israel, he will not then accept the theory which has been so freely adopted. That this claim may be clearly supported, it will be well to look at the book in these two ways.

If there is any intention, on the part of Jonah, to convert the Ninevites, it will appear in one, at least, of three places: either in the commission, the preaching, or the action of the Ninevites under the preaching. Now, God commanded Jonah to go and *threaten* Nineveh (1:2). There is nothing in the word "cry" which would indicate more than a call; and the word here is the

same as that which is most often used to indicate the public naming of an object or an action. The commission which Jonah received was to go and proclaim the doom of this wicked city. His second commission was of like nature. There is an Old Testament word, found in the fortieth psalm and the sixty-first chapter of Isaiah, which means the bringing of good tidings, but the word which is used in the third chapter of our book, instructing Jonah to "preach the preaching" (3:2), has in it the hint of the work of the herald who appears before a hostile city and announces, not its salvation or any opportunity of salvation, but its certain doom. There are no instructions to call to repentance, as did John the Baptist, or to call for renunciation of idolatry, as did Paul at Athens, or to recognize the breaking down of the barrier between the Jew and the Gentile, as were given to Peter.

When we consider the action of Jonah, there are to be weighed both what he did and what he said. There could have been no objection in Jonah's mind to the destruction of Nineveh. He might have thought of the danger a prophet would be in if he delivered such a message, and his running away would indicate that he had wholesome fear of the great and wicked city. If one should say that Jonah confessed that he had a very different reason for going to sea, it remains to ask, What did he say about his opinion of the city? You find nothing in the fourth chapter about a previous knowledge that the city would repent, only this, Jonah apprehended God's nature, and therefore said: "I know that thou art a gracious God, full of compassion, slow to anger, plenteous in mercy, and repentest thee of the evil" (4:2). And here lies a knotty problem which has nothing to do with the question before us. The point at issue is, Jonah ran away, not because he had any idea that Nineveh would repent, but that God would repent. When he preaches he announces the ultimatum: "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). There are no conditions; there is no hope in the message; it is not an announcement of salvation.

It is said that when the people heard this message they believed God; *i. e.*, they believed Jonah as the prophet of God;

they believed that he spoke the truth, that their city was in danger, and that when the forty days were ended the destruction would come. In view of such a calamity they fasted and put on sackcloth, but there is no hint of any destruction of idols. The king who was at the bottom of this humiliation, in more senses than one, not only commanded the people to fast and to pray to the God of Israel, but he did all that he commanded them to do, and sat in ashes himself, an act which he did not require of his people. Now, the fasting and the wearing of sackcloth were signs of mourning; the belief which is alluded to is not the faith of a converted heart or head, it is simply a belief of the prophet's word; the prayers which were offered had for incentive the peradventure, not the assurance of the prophet, that God might somehow be gracious and repent. This appeal to Jehovah was nothing more than the recognition of the power of the God of Israel, which none of the heathen nations of that day would deny, and they would quickly pray to the deity of any nation when they discovered that there was any intention to do them injury. It is a marvelous assumption to endow these men of Nineveh with religious characteristics that were practically unknown and were with difficulty being ground into the consciousness of Israel. It is granted at this point that the last clause of the eighth verse of the third chapter is still to be reckoned with, but it cannot be claimed that turning from evil ways and from the violence which was in their hands—at least it ought not to be claimed—that this means idolatry, and disloyalty to the God of Israel. Those who interpret the book from this point of view are compelled to admit that the repentance was of the most superficial kind; it was a mere scare at approaching danger, and a return to the old way as soon as the danger disappeared. And this gives rise to problems which are needless as well as difficult.

There are reasons for believing that the violence which was in the hands of the men of Nineveh was directed toward the people of Israel. The writer of this paper regards the book of Jonah to be historical and no fiction, for the reason that the historical conditions at the time of the prophet Jonah give us the

best key to the book. Consider! Jonah, the son of Amittai, was the friend and counselor of Jeroboam II, who is said to have regained the land of his fathers "from the entering in of Hamath unto the sea of the Arabah." Solomon was outdone northward, Damascus was taken, the borders of Israel were removed to the river Orontes, and Jeroboam found himself face to face with the powers of the Tigris and Euphrates. With the splendor of a rising kingdom about him, Jonah could understand that the Assyrian king, the flash of whose sword had been seen, now and again, on the northern horizon, was the competitor of Jeroboam II. Solomon had aspired to the honor of making a world-power of Israel. Jeroboam was fully as ambitious as Solomon. Jonah, as a true prophet, would seek the will of the Lord; Jeroboam cared little for Jehovah, only as he gave prosperity. These two had worked together in the past, and it was because of Jonah that the kingdom had come to such glory.

Now, right at this juncture God commands Jonah to go to Nineveh and threaten it. And now comes the crisis in this man's life. If he could be allowed to announce the doom of this city to his own people, there would be no question about the result. Jonah would be confident, the people would be exultant, the king would be satisfied. For him to go to Nineveh would be an unheard-of action; no prophet had ever done the like; it could not meet the approval of a king like Jeroboam, and with Jonah's knowledge of God it would point to the forewarning, and therefore the forearming, of the enemy. This is not stated as fact, but the conjectures that are here are certainly as admissible as many of those that have hitherto been proposed. From the teeth of that crisis Jonah fled. When we look at the situation from the other side, we must acknowledge that Nineveh could not be ignorant of the growing greatness of Israel, or that God's chosen people were at the borders of Assyria and would soon be knocking at the gates of Nineveh. The battles of the nations were, to them, the battles of the gods. Then, suddenly, in a foreign tongue, came the cry, "Forty days and Nineveh shall be destroyed." Can anything be more natural than the effect which is here portrayed? It is not unwise to regard that

in this act was the salvation of Israel. Nineveh was at the height of its greatness. Humanly speaking, a conflict between Nineveh and Israel could have resulted only in the defeat of Israel. By God's instruction the moral force of a prophet's voice in a strange land averted, for the time at least, the hostilities which would have been so disastrous.

The fourth chapter of the book bears out this interpretation. In it are three types, the gourd which God prepares, the worm which destroys it, and the sultry east wind. The gourd was the type of Israel which God had caused to grow over Jonah; the worm was the idolatrous worship of the calves at Bethel and Dan, and the greed and lust and murder that were sapping the people under Jeroboam; the sultry east wind was a common figure of the prophets designating the powers of the Euphrates. Jonah was very much interested in the gourd, and when he was told that the kingdom was to fall as the gourd had withered, he thought it better to die than to live. The lesson which he had to learn was that, while God had repeatedly appealed to Israel, his own people had not mourned or cried unto the Most High; and yet here was Nineveh, which he despised, fasting and wearing sackcloth at the preaching of a strange prophet. And the question which is put to Jonah is: Inasmuch as these two, Israel and Nineveh, are in the balances, upon whom shall God have mercy, and to whom shall he give the victory and the world-power? Shall he destroy a city in which there are thousands who do not know their right hand from their left and spare Israel, exalting Israel to such greatness as the ambition of Jeroboam desired, when Israel had full knowledge of God and yet was wicked and stubborn? The Old Testament does not admit that mere numbers and worldly power are any cause for the defeat of God's people, and here the sentiment is in sympathy with all other Scriptures, because it points out the weakness of Israel—unbelief, and apostasy.

In a recent article it is written: "It is incredible that such a complete moral and religious revolution as is here depicted should have taken place without leaving some record of itself in history." But there is no moral or religious revolution

depicted, much less a complete revolution. The action of the men of Nineveh in praying to God is of the same order as that of the seamen in the first chapter who pray each man unto his own god, until they discover that Jonah is the cause of the trouble, and then they pray to his God. And when the sea was quieted they feared the Lord so much that they sacrificed to him and made vows, and yet it is not to be supposed that from that time on they were proselytes of Israel. It is no wonder that Jonah drops out of sight after he has undertaken to act against Jeroboam, and that which the king considered as the highest interests of the kingdom; and there can be little surprise that a time of confusion should follow the crisis in which Jonah appears as the enemy of Israel's extension.

With this understanding of the situation the last clause of the eighth verse of the third chapter becomes clear. The "evil way" and the "violence" were their enmity to God's chosen and the disposition to treat Israel in Syria as they had been treating the Syrians. One needs only to look in the other prophets to find that this enmity is the reason for the destruction of the nations, and it is stated most clearly in Ezek., chaps. 25-32. And so Jonah's mission was not to convert the Ninevites, but to cause them to respect Israel and Israel's God, and it resulted, not in a treaty, but in a truce, a cessation of hostilities.